## Sociologists and Historical Research

Sociologists often want to look into the past to look at long-term social change, but historical sociology/social history poses particular problems associated with the use of **secondary data** and **content analysis**.

## PET

The single most obvious organising principle here should be PET analysis, i.e., that you consider different categories of explanation

## Practical Issues

There are particular issues presented through the use of secondary data (as defined by sociologists not historians, who would define much of this as primary.

* Important materials may not survive leaving only **partial records**.
* **Access to materials**, especially when not held in established collections or libraries may be difficult.
* In largely **pre-literate** populations only official or elite opinions may be represented.

Ethical Issues

Few ethical issues are presented by historical records as regards the integrity of researchers or respondents when compared to primary research. However, this assumes that, historically, more distant periods are under study - **more recent history may be more problematic**.

**Theoretical Issues**

**1. Positivists**

* Positivists may be interested in **quantitative data** but surviving records may be patchy leading to problems of **representativeness**.
* As with other secondary data, the **biases** and specific questions asked by others may colour the research of the researcher, perhaps without their knowledge.
* **Replication** and **verification** are generally impossible – problems of **reliability**.

**2. Interpretivists**

* Phenomenologists will be interested in life documents but the truthfulness of other peoples’ diaries, letters and so on may be difficult to establish.
* Those being researched clearly cannot respond to specific issues or clarify difficulties
* Researchers may simply read their own preconceived ideas into the historical record with little chance of verification, but imaginative reconstruction is necessary.

## Some Useful Case Studies

## Thomas and Zaniewski – The Polish Peasant

Letters of Polish migrants to the USA and their families used to assess their experience of emigration.

## Peter Laslett – The World We Have Lost

Attempted to use surviving parish records to compile demographic material from early modern (pre-Census) England

## Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie - Montaillou

Used Inquisition records to look at the everyday life of villagers in the medieval Langue d’Oc in southern France

## Philippe Aries – Centuries of Childhood

Tries to understand the development of childhood as an experience from the medieval period to the modern world using a variety of literary and pictorial sources.

## Michael Young and Peter Willmott – The Symmetrical Family

Synthesises the work of historians with a new comprehensive survey of modern family life.

## Conclusions

Historical research is necessary to any sociologist interested in the problems of social change but presents significant and often insurmountable problems. The past is another country; they do things differently there …